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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether teachers of English in Florida agree with one another on the status of disputed items of English usage and whether the factors of sex, years of teaching experience, academic degree, and teaching level affect the attitudes of English teachers toward usage items. Analyses of data collected from 723 teachers in junior high schools, middle schools, senior high schools, and junior colleges indicated that there was considerable disagreement among the teachers on the acceptability of the items; that male teachers accepted more items than did female teachers; that teachers with ten years or less of teaching experience accepted more items than did teachers with more than ten years' experience, except at the junior college level; that teachers with undergraduate degrees only and those with graduate degrees were equally willing to accept the items; and that junior-high/middle-school teachers accepted more items than did senior high school teachers, who in turn accepted more items than did junior college teachers. (Author/AA)

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# AN ANALYSIS OF FACTORS WHICH AFFECT TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD ENGLISH USAGE

Edward Deluzain

One of the most important assumptions underlying the current Back to Basics movement is that the content of the basic-skills disciplines, including the basic "skill" of English usage, is well defined to the point that the people responsible for teaching the content agree with one another about which propositions about the content are true and which are not. In mathematics, the assumption applies to such universally accepted number "facts" as $2 + 2 = 4$, $6 - 3 = 3$, $2 \times 5 \neq 11$, etc. In English usage, the assumption applies to such propositions as "Locution X is correct, or acceptable;" "Locution Y is incorrect, or unacceptable." Quite clearly, unless the assumption is valid, the argument that students should master the concepts expressed in propositions about content breaks apart, and standardized tests which purport to measure mastery of these concepts become little more than "guess what I'm thinking" exercises.

In the case of English usage, establishing the validity of the assumption about the content of the discipline is necessary, but not sufficient, to justify a major re-emphasis on basic skills. Once the validity of the assumption about content is established, the validity of the

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assumption that it is desirable for students to master the concepts expressed in a single, uniform set of propositions about the correctness or acceptability of items of usage must also be proved. The evidence offered by the National Council of Teachers of English (1974) regarding the social discrimination and the potential for psychological harm to students inherent in forcing children to abandon their native social dialects makes it appear that the validity of the assumption of desirability is false. However, the validity of the assumption about content remains an open question.

It was the purpose of this research to examine the validity of the "content assumption" regarding English usage by studying the attitudes of teachers of English in Florida toward items of usage which have histories of disputed status. In addition, this research sought to determine whether significant differences in attitudes toward the items existed when teachers were grouped on the basis of sex, years of teaching experience, academic degree, and teaching level. The instrument used in this study, as well as the research methods and the factors chosen for investigation, evolved primarily from the studies of Leonard (1935), Crisp (1971), and Womack (1957). Because of their importance to this study, these investigations will be reviewed in some detail.

Leonard and Moffett (1927) conducted a preliminary survey of the attitudes of linguists, teachers of English and of speech, business executives, contemporary authors, and

editors toward 102 items of usage "usually condemned in English textbooks and classes" (Leonard & Moffett, 1927, p. 345). Leonard expanded the study by surveying the attitudes of additional linguists and teachers of English toward another 130 items, and he published the combined results in Current English Usage (1935) under his name alone. The participants of both surveys were asked to rate each item as one of the following: (1) Literary English; (2) Standard, Cultivated, Colloquial English; (3) Trade or Technical English; and, (4) Naif, Popular, or Uncultivated English. The third category was eventually dropped from the study because only a handful of items received that rating.

In the analysis of the data, if an item was rated in the first or second categories by 75% or more of the judges, it was considered to be "established" usage. If an item was rated in the fourth category by at least 75% of the respondents, it was considered to be "uncultivated or illiterate" (i.e., nonstandard) usage. All items which were not judged to be established or nonstandard were considered to be "disputable." Of the 230 items which are reported on in Current English Usage (1935), 73 were rated established, 4 were rated technical English, 105 were rated disputable, and 48 were rated nonstandard.

Crisp (1971) replicated Leonard's work by using 184 of Leonard's items (plus 31 of his own) to survey the same kinds of informants used by Leonard. Crisp's participants

were asked to rate each item as either (1) Literary English, (2) Standard English, or (3) Nonstandard English, and he used Leonard's 75% criterion to classify each item as established, disputable, or nonstandard. Of the 184 items common to both the Leonard and Crisp studies, Leonard's respondents found 45 to be established, 94 to be disputable, and 45 to be nonstandard. Crisp's respondents found 81 of the items to be established, 73 to be disputable, and 30 to be nonstandard.

Crisp added the dimension of regional dialect differences to his study by grouping his respondents into linguistic-geographic regions of the United States and determining the established, disputable, and nonstandard usages within each region. In the linguistic-geographic region that included Florida, 40 items rated disputable in Leonard's study were also rated disputable in Crisp's. These 40 items, which have a long and well-documented history of divided opinion about their status and which take into consideration regional dialect differences, were used in the present study.

Womack (1957) used a questionnaire which contained 50 disputed items of usage to elicit the opinions of English teachers at the elementary, secondary, and college levels. Womack was primarily interested in investigating the affects on attitudes toward usage of such factors as (a) number of years of teaching experience; (b) grade level at which the teachers taught; (c) population of the community

in which the teachers taught; and, (d) the academic degrees which the teachers held. Womack's questionnaire required that teachers rate each item as belonging to one of the following categories for both speech and writing: not acceptable, acceptable in formal situations only, acceptable in informal situations only, and acceptable in both formal and informal situations.

Womack performed chi-square tests on his data and concluded that (a) college teachers accepted more items than elementary school teachers, who in turn accepted more items than high school teachers; (b) "there is clear evidence here that teachers' willingness to accept items of divided or debatable usage varies according to the length of their teaching experience" (p. 38); (c) "teachers living in small communities [i.e., less than 50,000 people]. . . are more likely than teachers living in large communities to reject the usage items" (p. 40); and, (d) "teachers holding doctor's degrees will be more willing to accept disputed usage items than teachers holding bachelor's and master's degrees" (p. 42).

The statistical methods Womack used raise some question about the validity of his findings. For example, he apparently did not consider the interaction of the factors he studied; rather, he treated his data as though they came from four distinct populations. However, despite shortcomings of this sort, the results of Womack's study clearly indicate that non-linguistic factors do influence teachers' attitudes toward items of usage. The factors of

years of teaching experience, academic degree, and teaching level were included in the present study primarily because of Womack's findings. Likewise, because Womack found that teachers in rural areas differ in their attitudes toward usage from teachers in larger communities, the population for the present study was limited to teachers who teach in school districts with total populations in excess of 50,000 people.

## Procedures

The Florida Department of Education provided data relative to the factors under investigation for teachers at the junior high/middle school and senior high levels. All certificated teachers of English in school districts with populations in excess of 50,000 people were stratified on the basis of the four factors, and proportional random samples were drawn from within each stratum. In all, 1,509 teachers at the junior high/middle school and senior high levels were selected to participate in the study.

The names of English teachers at the junior college level were obtained from the catalogs of their institutions. State teacher certification requirements stipulate that every junior college teacher must possess at least a master's degree, so the highest degree, as well as the teaching level, of every junior college teacher was known in advance. The sex of teachers was estimated on the basis of their first names, and proportional random samples were drawn

from lists of male and female teachers. Data from the background information sheet which accompanied the questionnaire used in this study were used to correct errors in sex assignment and to assign each teacher to one of two "years of teaching experience" groups. A total of 190 junior college teachers were selected to participate in the study.

The survey instrument used in this study consisted of an introductory letter, the background information sheet mentioned above, and a questionnaire containing 40 disputed items of usage which were obtained from the studies of Leonard (1935) and Crisp (1971). The background information sheet contained questions about the sex, teaching experience, and highest academic degree of the participants, and data from the sheet were used to re-assign teachers to correct strata in cases where errors had been made in the original assignments. The directions which accompanied the questionnaire requested the participants to rate each item as either not acceptable under any circumstances, or acceptable in one or more of the following situations: formal speech, informal speech, formal writing, and informal writing. Participants were asked to make their choices on the basis of the following definitions:

1. Formal Speech: speech suitable to a serious and important occasion, such as a presidential inaugural speech or a commencement address.

2. Informal Speech: speech suitable to polite conversation, classroom teaching, etc.
3. Formal Writing: writing suitable to important and serious documents, such as position papers, textbooks, etc.
4. Informal Writing: writing suitable to friendly letters, light and amusing fiction, etc.

The survey instruments and stamped return envelopes were mailed to the participants at their schools on March 30, 1976, and a follow-up letter was mailed to those participants who had not already returned questionnaires on May 5, 1976. The analysis of the data was based on 723 completed questionnaires, which represented 43% of the original mailing.

## Analysis of the Results

Each questionnaire was edited when it was returned, and the total number of responses in the four "acceptable" categories was tallied. The range of possible scores was zero to 160, and a low score meant a relative unwillingness to accept the disputed items of usage. The mean total score for the entire group of participants was 29.42, with a standard deviation of 17.28. The relatively low mean total score (out of a possible 160) indicated a general reluctance among the teachers to accept the items, and the relatively high standard deviation was evidence of considerable disagreement among the participants regarding the acceptability of the items.

The items were ranked from most acceptable to least acceptable on the basis of the number of times each item was rated acceptable by the total group of participants. Leonard (1935) and Crisp (1971) had both ranked the items in the same way, and coefficients of correlation were obtained as a means of comparing the rankings. The Spearman Rank-order Coefficient of Correlation between the ranks in Leonard's research and the present study was .11, and Spearman's rho for the present study and Crisp's data was .64. The low correlation between the data of the present study and Leonard's work reflected the considerable change in opinion about the acceptability of the items in the years that separate the two studies. On the other hand, the relatively high correlation between the data from the present study and data from Crisp's study showed that the current opinions of teachers of English in Florida about the items on the questionnaire are in large measure consistent with Crisp's national sample of a few years ago.

It is interesting to note differences in ranks in Leonard's (1935) study and the present one for individual items. In Leonard's study the item "My father walked very slow down the street" was ranked at the top of the list of the 40 items used in this study, but in this research it was ranked last. Likewise, Leonard's lowest ranked item, namely "I read in the paper where a plane was lost," was ranked seventeenth in this research. These comparisons, and many others that can be made between Leonard's study

and the present one, disprove the assumption that many teachers expressed in their comments that language standards are deteriorating. In essence, the comparisons demonstrate that attitudes toward usage items change, but the data cannot be used to predict the direction of change.

In order to perform the statistical analysis of the data with regard to the four factors under investigation, sex was divided into male and female; academic degree was divided into undergraduate degree only (BA) and graduate degree (MA+); teaching experience was divided into zero to 10 years (0-10) and more than 10 years (11+); and, teaching level was divided into junior high/middle school (JH/MS), senior high (SH), and junior college (JC). At first glance, it would appear that a single analysis of variance of the design 2 x 2 x 2 x 3 would be the most economical means of detecting statistically significant differences among subgroups of the sample. However, as mentioned above, no junior college teacher held less than a master's degree; therefore, the four cells in the design which corresponded to the subgroups Male--BA--0-10--JC, Male--BA--11+--JC, Female--BA--0-10--JC, and Female--BA--11+--JC were empty. These empty cells precluded a consideration of interaction effects. Since interaction effects were likely to exist among the factors, and since the interactions were likely to be of both statistical and educational significance, only main effects were considered in the four-way analysis of variance for the total group. In order

to accomplish this, the variance and degrees of freedom ordinarily associated with interactions effects were included in the residual variance and residual degrees of freedom. This had the effect of reducing the F-ratio for each main effect, thereby reducing the likelihood of significance at the .05 level.

In the four-way analysis of variance, sex was a significant main effect, $F$ (1, 717) = 39.5989, $p < .05$, with male teachers showing a willingness to accept more items than female teachers. Teaching experience was also significant, $F$ (1, 717) = 10.9958, $p < .05$, as was teaching level, $F$ (2, 717) = 3.4865, $p < .05$. Teachers with 0-10 years of experience accepted more items than their more experienced colleagues, and junior high/middle school teachers accepted more items than senior high teachers, who in turn accepted more items than junior college teachers. Academic degree was not a significant main effect, $F$ (1, 717) = .2374, $p < .05$. The means for the total group for each factor are displayed in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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A one-way analysis of variance was performed on the data for teaching level alone, and the Student-Newman-Keuls multiple range test was applied to the results. Significant differences existed among the levels, $F$ (2, 720) = 3.076, $p < .05$, but the differences were not great enough to indicate

heterogeneity for any subset.

A three-way analysis of variance procedure was used on the data for the junior high/middle school teachers and again on the data for the senior high teachers. In both cases, sex (JH/MS: $F$ (1, 299) = 19.604, $p<.05$; SH: $F$ (1, 330)= 14.243, $p<.05$) and teaching experience (JH/MS: $F$ (1, 299) = 10.828, $p<.05$; SH: $F$ (1, 330) = 4.550, $p<.05$) were significant at the .05 level, but degree (JH/MS: $F$ (1, 229) = .134, $p<.05$; SH: $F$ (1, 330) = .002, $p<.05$) was not. The only significant interaction occurred for junior high/ middle school teachers, where the interaction of sex and degree was significant, $F$ (1, 299) = 7.736, $p<.05$. This interaction indicated that the difference between scores for male teachers with undergraduate degrees only and male teachers with graduate degrees was significantly greater than differences between female teachers with undergraduate degrees only and female teachers with graduate degrees. For teachers at both the junior high/middle school and senior high levels, males accepted more items than females, and teachers with 0-10 years of experience accepted more items than teachers with 11+ years of experience.

At the junior college level, the two-way analysis of variance was used, with the result that sex was a significant main effect, $F$ (1, 74) = 8.188, $p<.05$, but experience was not, $F$ (1, 74) = 1.078, $p<.05$. The interaction of sex and experience was not significant. However, it is interesting to note that on the junior college level the

pattern of mean scores related to years of experience was the reverse of what it had been for the other grade levels, and teachers with 11+ years of experience accepted more items ($\bar{X}$ = 27.33) than teachers with 0-10 years of experience ($\bar{X}$ = 24.25).

## Discussion of the Results

In general, it appears that men are more willing to accept disputed items of usage than women are. This fact can probably be attributed to the stereotype common in the mass media which associates "toughness" (Labov, 1970, p. 30), or masculinity, with the use of nonstandard speech forms. The male English teachers in this study were probably also aware of the stereotype of effeminacy that is often associated with members of their profession, and their responses to this survey--and possibly to the usage patterns of their students as well--may have been colored by an attempt to compensate for their generally unflattering image. Whatever the reason, though, sex differences in attitudes toward disputed items of usage are definitely present in the data collected in this research.

The differences related to years of teaching experience, while perhaps not surprising, are more difficult to interpret. Data on the date of birth of the junior high/middle school and senior high teachers were available from the original list furnished by the Florida Department of Education. Because of the obvious relationship between years of teaching

experience and age for most people, the information on date of birth was used to examine differences in groups defined in terms of years of experience by assigning each respondent to one of five age groups. Mean scores were computed for each group, and, as the data in Table 2 indicate, there was a distinct tendency for willingness to accept the items to decrease as age increased. The analysis of variance indicated that significant differences did exist among age groups, $F$ (4, 639) = 7.49, $p$ .05. The Student-Newman-Keuls multiple range test pointed out two heterogeneous subsets. Subset 1 consisted of the means of the following age groups: 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60-69; and, subset 2 consisted of the mean for the 20-29 age group.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Labov (1966) called the tendency for linguistic variables to be sensitive to age differences "age grading," and he said it occurs because the status of individual linguistic variables changes over time. Thus, in terms of Labov's explanation, it would appear that the items used in this study have increased in acceptability in the last several decades. This is clearly not the case, however, since Leonard (1935) found all of the items to be disputed when he conducted his research in the late 1920s and early 1930s. If drastic changes occurred with regard to the status of the items, they had reversed themselves by the time

Crisp (1971) conducted his investigation. Indeed, had drastic changes in status occurred, one would expect people in the middle age groups to have mean scores considerably higher or lower than the other age groups.

A more plausible explanation of the age-group differences, and hence of differences in groups defined in terms of years of teaching experience, lies in the shift in emphasis from prescriptive grammar to more descriptive grammatical theories in teacher training institutions. All of the teachers in the 20-29 age group had graduated from college within 10 years of the time this study was conducted, and it is likely that they had had more opportunity to be exposed to descriptive linguistics in college than their older colleagues. It is possible that their attitudes toward the items in this study stem from their exposure to the more enlightened theories of language which have been introduced in the last two decades.

The academic degree level of teachers in this study was not statistically significant as a main effect in any of the analyses performed here. Obviously, additional research must be done to determine whether formal education affects attitudes toward usage items before any final conclusions can be stated, but in this study there is no evidence to indicate that academic degree level has any significant relationship to a person's attitudes toward disputed items of usage. The only exception to this was at the junior high/middle school level, where the inter-

action of sex and degree was significant.

Finally, the data from this study indicated that teachers at the three grade levels used here differ from one another in their personal standards of acceptability for disputed items of usage. The tendency for willingness to accept disputed usages to decrease as grade level increases is perhaps indicative of the belief that more exacting standards of language usage should be set for students in higher grades. Whatever the reason, though, it is apparently a fact that students will find that some usages which were acceptable in junior high school will not be acceptable when they enter junior college.

## Conclusions and Implications

One purpose of this study was to test the validity of the assumption that the content of English usage is well defined to the point that the people who are expected to teach it agree with one another about the truth or falseness of propositions about the content. It appears from the results obtained here that the assumption is not valid. Needless to say, this conclusion, as well as all other conclusions based on this study, must be interpreted within the limitations of the study itself.

A second purpose of this research was to identify factors which are related to teachers' willingness to accept disputed items of usage. It appears from the results

obtained here that sex, age, years of teaching experience, and teaching level are related to attitudes toward usage items in significant ways, but that academic degree level is not.

The major curricular implication of these results is that the Back to Basics movement, insofar as it is concerned with English usage, should be forced to develop within the constraints imposed by the limitations of the content and the desirability of having every student learn a single version of English. That is to say, because of the apparent widespread disagreement among teachers about content, the teaching of usage should be considered outside of the framework of rigid rules and prescriptions, and students must be free to learn usage as "the relationship between what goes on inside a language and the context of speaker, audience, time, place, and occasion in which it occurs" (Allen, 1964, p. 272).

Another implication that the results of this study suggest concerns evaluation procedures, especially standardized tests of usage. It is quite clear that the results of this investigation suggest that students who make low scores on tests of usage may do so because the brand of usage they are taught in school differs from the brand of usage expected on the tests. Therefore, it would seem that test scores should be interpreted in this light.

Finally, the results of this study imply that language usage, as complex human behavior, is influenced by myriad

factors. Some of these factors may lend themselves to quantification and scientific study, while many others may not. Nevertheless, there is a need to further investigate language usage and language users to shed new light on the factors which operate on human communications.

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Table 1

Mean Total Scores for the Four Factors for the Total Group

| Sex | | Experience | | Degree | | Level | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 35.18 | 0-10 | 31.38 | BA | 29.89 | JH/MS | 31.14 |
| Female | 27.18 | 11+ | 26.97 | MA+ | 28.93 | SH | 28.52 |
| | | | | | | JC | 26.54 |

Table 2

Mean Total Scores for Age Groups
For Junior High/Middle School
and Senior High Teachers

| Age Groups | Mean Total Score |
|---|---|
| 20-29 | 34.14 |
| 30-39 | 29.64 |
| 40-49 | 26.35 |
| 50-59 | 25.99 |
| 60-69 | 22.34 |